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Postindustrial Ecologies: Industrial Rubble, Nature and the Limits of Representation

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INTRODUCTION

The main question that I raise in this article is how one should classify and represent urban postindustrial landscapes, materialities and socionatures that are difficult to categorize and do not easily fit any conventional label. If postindustrial spaces elude not only planned usage, but also the domination of a single unplanned function, how may one narrate them and construct a coherent representation? The landscape that replaces former industrial spaces in Bucharest resists master narratives about “return to nature,” “abandonment,” “real-estate development,” “industrial heritage,” “creative industries” or “curated ruin” which are often deployed on postindustrial sites in cities across the world (Edensor, 2005; Bélanger, 2009; Millington, 2013; Moshenska, 2015). Instead of a master narrative, the emergent ecologies of ex-industrial places in Bucharest combine fragments of planned and unplanned action, geological, human and biological agency, natural and human-made ruination. They have fragments of each, but no single one dominates. As I will describe below, deindustrialization produces open-ended spaces, exposed to change and with minimal internal consistency (Culescu, 2007: 7). In describing this unstable, emerging ecology, I describe the actors – mainly human, but also non-human – their actions and the materialities that populate such sites.

Bucharest experienced massive de-industrialization in the 1990s and 2000s. This is similar to most other cities in Central and Eastern Europe (Marcinczak and Sagan, 2010; Ianoş et al., 2012; Mirea et al., 2012; Nikezić and Janković, 2012; Pozniak, 2013; Popescu, 2014; Grigor and Katchi, 2015; Jucu, 2015; Mulíček 2015). Despite a continent-wide process of deindustrialization in most ex-socialist countries, the narrowly utilitarian approach to urban nature, as well as the entrepreneurial vision of urban life that seized the fantasies of municipal administrators, blinded many scholars to the importance of such spaces for understanding cities, nature, value and urban metabolism (Gandy, 2013 : 1301 ; Edensor, 2005). A cursory comparison of the 1899 and 2002 census figures indicates that the percentage of people working in industry in Bucharest is identical (nine per cent). At the top of the 2003–2008 real estate bubble, out of the 200 large industrial plants in Bucharest, only about 33%

were still active (Chelcea, 2008). Some 30% still operated, but at reduced intensity. Some 20% had been turned into rental and warehouse space. Finally, 33 such factories were left completely idle, or had been demolished or a combination of both (Chelcea, 2008). It is on this last category that I focus most, although some insights apply even to those that are still active and those that have scaled down the space that they use. As industrial plants go bankrupt or await the lifting of the ten-years-post-privatization ban on demolition, they remain “idle” for hegemonic purposes, generating, nonetheless, a variety of usages and eclectic landscapes.

While there are situations when one particular usage may take over, many postindustrial sites have a mixture of several usages. There are four main activities that I have identified on postindustrial sites: (1) urban mining; (2) playgrounds for children; (3) refuges for urban marginals (humans and non-humans alike); and (4) struggles to construct signification by the cultural bourgeoisie. I collected data through steady, mainly non-participant observation of industrial sites over a period of about 10 years. I visited about 40 such sites. I made recurrent visits to eight such sites as they are located in the part of Bucharest where I live (the Filaret – Parcul Carol – Tineretului – Timpuri Noi area). I walked and drove by other postindustrial sites numerous times, sometimes stopping for a few minutes just to note what had changed, at other times staying for hours when unique events such as demolitions or urban mining activities were taking place.

AN ECLECTIC, EMERGENT ECOLOGY: URBAN MINING, PLAYGROUNDS AND REFUGES FOR MARGINALS

Once production stops, many such sites are not secured any longer, allowing industrial materiality mixes to get transformed through the actions not only of humans, but also of plants and animals. One key set of actors reconfiguring this new ecology are the underclass families and individuals who extract scrap metal and bricks. Their extractive efforts amount to what Wallsten et al. (2013 : 85) call “urban mining”, i.e. target areas (“infrastructural mines”) which are spatially concentrated and rich in minerals, inside the boundaries of the city (see also Wallsten 2015). The dynamics of such extractive groups are relatively diverse. Sometimes the owners of ex-industrial sites separate mobile and easily removable metal parts from these spaces and sell them to scrap metal centers. Plants sell the massive older machinery, obsolete stock and metal-built structures that populate their former industrial premises. Once this “top-down” circulation of valuables is over, most industrial plants are morally abandoned by their owners. This means that security is lifted, either intentionally or because of a lack of resources to secure the perimeter. Once that happens, outside people are able to enter the premises. Some of them are the ex-workers, but more often they are

underclass groups who live in the vicinity of such factories or who are constantly on the lookout for scrap metal throughout the city (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1 - The wall of a XIXth century factory, after demolition. Credits: Liviu Chelcea.

I witnessed several such episodes of urban mining. In some instances, the groups extracting metal were composed of young, underclass couples who transported scrap metal either with their hands or by using pushcarts. In another situation, I found an adult man with three children tearing down the entrance of a building. In other cases the groups are quite sizeable, composed of 10 to 100 people. The largest group that I encountered was at Timpuri Noi Metal Works, an old factory constructed in the second half of the XIXth century. Located relatively close to the city center, it was demolished after the company relocated some 40 kilometers away from Bucharest. The demolition debris from buildings was then smashed by the demolition company into small pieces and gathered in large piles. A few days after that happened, a sizeable group of poor families, including children, entered the premises. For three full winter days they smashed the ground concrete of the former plant searching for additional metal. They found cast iron pipes, cables and metal strips used in reinforced concrete. They transported these pieces to a scrap metal center located about 150 meters away, where the scrap was weighed and paid for in cash. Especially since it was cold late fall day, on the way back from the scrap center, they sometimes stopped at a minimarket and purchased coffee and snacks before returning to the site. I counted, on average four or five such trips per group.



Figure 2 - The yard of the same demolished factory (Timpuri Noi), a couple of days after its demolition. The owner allowed about 50 to 100 people to enter the premises, dig for the scrap metal and carry it to a collection center situated about 150 meters away. Credits: Liviu Chelcea.

Other marginal resources, such as bricks or wood for heating are also extracted. The moment of destruction is followed by a new form of ordering of the deterritorialized matter. This cycle of deterritorialization, appropriation and relocation of marginal resources is “placed by the relevant actors in a framework of ‘negative reciprocity’..., which identifies the State with the primordial wrongdoer” (Mateescu, 2004: 85). Bypassing the property regulations – perceived by the poor as a never-ending series of conspiracies against them – such families embed the ownership of nonfunctional factories into the realm of neighborhood ownership. On a trip to a factory of this kind that I observed for longer, I found a group of four children and their father tearing down the iron decorations of one of the administrative buildings, transporting them to their nearby yard. In successive trips to another factory, I witnessed the gradual disappearance of brick walls and the erection of ordered piles of bricks in front of the nearby houses, waiting to be circulated afterwards. The extraction and demolition of such spaces generate hectares upon hectares of industrial wasteland.

The emerging landscape often represents a fascinating playground for children. To many children of such areas in Bucharest,

the [industrial] wasteland represents a space of freedom, a childhood paradise, an urban incarnation of the plain, the mountain or the hill, all of which are located right in the backyard, in the forest populated by oversized animals and scary monsters with which we fought for many years (Tudora, 2007 : 1).

Mircea Cărtărescu, a famous Romanian writer, mentioned that some of his fondest memories were related to the bread factory that used to stand behind his apartment building. This unplanned usage is intensified by the fact that

most post-industrial sites occur in neighborhoods that are characterized by a lack of parks and other open space, below-average environmental quality, and are frequently inhabited by communities that are affected by the very processes of industrialization and deindustrialization that created such sites in the first place (Langhorst, 2015: 2).

This is much more the case in Bucharest, since the city has the highest population density in Europe, with about 8099 inhabitants per square kilometer, compared to, for instance, 3800 in Berlin or 1089 in Dublin (Chelcea and Iancu, 2015: 64).



Figure 3 - The yard of a nonfunctional factory, being taken over by ruderal vegetation.
Credits: Liviu Chelcea.

As previous efforts to separate “nature” from “society” (e.g. removing ruderal plants, chasing away animals, preventing decay etc.) cease, new actors step in. Postindustrial spaces may also be regarded as heterotopias, i.e. non-hegemonic places where sovereignty disintegrates (Foucault, 1986 [1984]). There are also other marginal urbanites, aside from those practicing “urban mining”, using such areas. “Homeless people” – a new discursive formation and housing condition which emerged after the end of socialism (O’Neill, 2014) – sometimes end up sleeping in such places. Ex-industrial sites represent, in a twisted way, private, yet public spaces, not unlike the land surrounding the land strip of the former Wall in Berlin. In such spaces,

“nature itself practices an architectural function, modifying the existing one and thus modifying the aspect of the place and, simultaneously, its function” (Culescu, 2007: 2). As Joern Langhorst (2015: 2) notes:

emergent ecologies can be considered the most authentic elements of urban nature, as they are the physical expressions of processes that are not controlled by human maintenance regimes and are most often manifested in early-stage successional vegetation.

They stand in stark contrast with the costly, fetishised nature produced by the office for landscape works of the municipality (Administrația Domeniului Public), which is based on manicured lawns, “exotic” plants (relative to the climate in Romania) and the flamboyant flower pots that are found in abundance on most boulevards of the city (Pondichie, 2012: 65-71).

As in other cities, once buried under the growing vegetation such areas have a positive ecological value for Bucharest, providing new sites for plants and animals to colonize (Box, 1999; Lachmund, 2013). In such postindustrial sites, “as the vegetation is entirely managed by nature and lacking human intervention, it has a clear contribution to the self-regulation of the local micro-climate, soil regeneration and temperature control” (Culescu, 2007: 7). Culescu nicely explains that the distinction between weed and “green lawn” is arbitrary, in the sense that it is cultural, rather than based on intrinsic ecologic value. Such industrial wastelands in Bucharest attract ruderal flora, gathering “species with a high degree of adaptation to urban environment: pollution, fatigue, poor soil, climatic conditions” (Culescu, 2007: 3). Along with industrial wastelands they travel to other marginal urban spaces such as roads, beaten dust paths or cracks in buildings (Figure 3). Marginal non-humans, such as stray dogs, owls, rats and even pheasants also find refuge here. Sometimes such animals are welcomed to stay. Security guards rely on strays to defend the premises of ex-industrial sites. During the day, they sleep near the security guards’ cabins; during the night they roam free, alerting guards to suspect sounds and activities. People in the neighborhoods surrounding such sites generally lament the combination of ex-industrial rubble and nature. They interpret ruination and the presence of ruderal flora and animals, – i.e. the capacity to separate nature from society – as a double failure: as the failure of post-socialist transition to save socialist-era industry and as a market failure to generate new usage for such lands.

The mixture of the ruination produced by the extraction of scrap metal, the growth of plants, and freedom of access generates an ambiguous, open-ended landscape. This was well illustrated by the case of another centrally located factory which I observed regularly. Called Frigul (literally “The Cold”), it was built at the beginning of the 1920s and it used to lie in the Filaret area, one of the earliest industrial concentrations in Bucharest. This industrial concentration emerged around the first railway station constructed in 1869. Frigul produced and delivered ice and refrigerators to various businesses until

the early 1990s. Until it was demolished, its premises consisted of one large building, erected most likely in the early 1950s, plus a few small technical buildings.

In the early 1990s, due mainly to the influx of cheap fridges, it stopped functioning. It functioned as a storage area for a while and then it was left idle until about 2005. In 2006 it entered into a process of demolition, which lasted for about one year. During that year, due to the freedom that the remaining workers enjoyed during the demolition, it generated a carnivalesque landscape (see Figure 4). While I do not know who created this combination of a female mannequin and factory gear, this artifact is indicative of the freedom that such spaces generate.



Figure 4 - The yard of a factory awaiting demolition. Credits: Liviu Chelcea.

After it had been demolished, the land was left idle. It became the home of a group of about six or seven very peaceful stray dogs (Figure 5). Fed by various people from that street and from the neighborhood (including myself), they managed to subsist in the area until the municipality killed them, for no reason, in 2013. The area was surrounded by a metal fence. It was intended as the site of a future gated community complex, but no actual construction work has been undertaken to this day. Instead, its surface has become green. As there is no significant activity, the new plants keep growing beyond the fence.



Figure 5 - Some of the stray dogs that lived near an ex-industrial area, taken care of by the neighbors and killed in 2013 by Bucharest's local authorities. Credits: Liviu Chelcea.

The case of the Frigul plant is not unique. There are factories that close down and get demolished in order to have their land used for new construction. Between the time of demolition and the moment of completion of the new building – a period that may last for years – the owners usually keep the original fences, in order to ease the work of the security personnel. Such is the case of a factory which had been producing canola oil since 1899 (initially called “Phoenix”), but which was bought by the large multinational company Bunge in early 2000s, along with two other key producers from the Romanian cities of Oradea and Iași. All three were closed down in 2007, as a result of the company's decision to concentrate its regional investments in Latvia, Turkey, Ukraine, Poland and Ukraine¹. During that year the plant was demolished, save for the large fence that surrounds it, its main gate and the administrative building. These are usually kept as a protective measure against homeless families who might take hold on such urban land, reinforcing Langhorst's (2015: 9) observation that “the replacement of the ecologically transgressive corresponds to the exclusion and displacement of the socially transgressive.” Upon completion of the real estate projects, the original fences are torn down too.

STRUGGLES FOR SIGNIFICATION: FROM RUBBLE AND OPEN-ENDED MEANING TO UNSTABLE REPRESENTATIONS

1 <http://www.bunge.com/company-history>, retrieved on November 1, 2013.

For people who make use of these sites, as Gordillo notes, postindustrial landscape is anything but past. They are not “debris from a distant past” (Gordillo 2014: 19), but are part of the economic and social configurations of the present. There is another category of people whose engagement with postindustrial sites is mainly in the realm of urban exploration, art, “heritage” and, more generally, the production of meaning.

The rapid decay and symbolic ambiguity of the postindustrial wastelands frequently stimulates the curiosity of some inhabitants of Bucharest, usually those associated with artistic production, heritage conservation, antiquarianism, or collecting, but also conspiracy theorists seeking proof of hidden histories of power. Such people struggle to transform rubble into ruins, in the sense that they cast industrial materialities as “past”, presenting them “as objects separated from the present” (*idem*: 8), reinforcing Langhorst’s (2015: 2) point about the strong association between such postindustrial sites and their aesthetic and representational function.

In his classic essay on death, Robert Hertz argued that someone’s death reaches closure only when decomposition of the dead body is over. It is only then, when the deceased stops belonging to this world and begins to enter another life, that closure occurs (Hertz, 1960 [1907]: 47). One may draw an analogy with the factories of Bucharest, which disappear without any of their parts being saved or relocated to museum or archives, thus preventing any future architectural consumption or closure. As such buildings are eviscerated of meaning – losing parts such as machinery, archives, labor protection panels or other inscriptions bearing meaning, without them being even photographed – their “decomposition” becomes a stimulus for creativity and imagination.

The speed and the anonymity of the disappearance of such industrial spaces and their open nature, renders their demolition “impure”. Art critic Michael Roth notes that “the disappearance, the threat of loss, is key to the attraction of ruins – and to their essential ambiguity” (1997: 2). Such a loss is especially bitter for factories from the early XIXth-century period of industrialization. According to one industrial heritage specialist,

after the Second World War, the Communist regime confiscated, but did not seriously damage, the machines, due to a desire to exploit them at minimum replacement costs. Exceptional technical XIXth-century machinery may still be found functioning in Romania [as of the early 1990s]. Unfortunately, the efforts to save this valuable heritage are virtually nonexistent. (Iamandescu, 2005: 7)

Such interpretative frames reposition rubble as “ruins”, i.e. “objects of transcendental significance” (Gordillo, 2014: 10).

Even the few factories enjoying heritage status – and thus legal protection from demolition – do not get to enjoy their status as objects worthy of preservation. The current legislation protects the façades of heritage buildings

from demolition. Some façades are integrated more or less harmoniously within the new buildings constructed after demolition ; such is the case of the Bursa de Mărfuri or Tipografia Cartea Românească. There are cases, however, where the façade is totally disconnected from the rest of the newly constructed buildings, thus becoming relegated to the status of a residual structure vis-à-vis the new urban construction. The owners of sites with heritage structures usually wait – and hope that the latter will collapse by themselves. Timpuri Noi Metalworks – mentioned above – was forced to spare three buildings from demolition when the other buildings on the site were demolished. Two years further on from the episode described above, the three heritage buildings have disappeared, and the entire site is now built over.

Georg Simmel argued in his classic essay *The Metropolis and the Mental Life* (2005 [1903]) that the mental and sensorial overstimulation of urban life generates an indifferent attitude and a retreat from the high tempo of the street into the private space. In opposition to that, the flâneur, as described by Walter Benjamin, seeks, at a reduced tempo, the hidden treasures of the city and to spontaneously remember forgotten experiences. Nonfunctioning factories regularly receive attention from flâneurs. Some tend to carry out their activities at a slow tempo indicative of a view that treats “postindustrial sites as picturesque artifacts” (Langhorst, 2015: 3). The more adventurous ones do not mind the sensorial lack of comfort produced by dust, water, excreta and unpleasant smells. The tension between the “mystery” of such “abandoned” spaces and the feeling of achievement that one gets from entering them are in themselves attractions for urban explorers. These places are visited and then described on blogs as terra incognita, set in opposition to the post-socialist consumerist modernity (Văetiș, 2011: 89-91).

One exhibition in Bucharest displayed, among other things, a pile of garbage gathered from Moara lui Assan, an industrial landmark of the city (Figure 6), apparently protesting the lack of sensibility to industrial heritage. Similarly, in the same exhibition called “Garbage, leftovers and ruins”², the artist Mircea Nicolae also exhibited the metal letters that formed the name of a factory awaiting demolition (Figure 7). This artistic practice stands in stark contrast with the “controlled, choreographed and pretexted experience” of redeveloped and redesigned sites, such as The High Line in New York City (Langhorst, 2015 : 5). The letters were saved during a visit on site by the artist himself together with a friend. They function as what one might call, extending Moshenska’s analysis (2015: 80) “curated debris,” i.e. mobile artifacts of deindustrialization which “can be maintained in [their] static, ruined state through careful conservation and stabilization.” Such an aesthetic choice resonates with Gordillo’s observation (2014: 9) that “‘rubble’ signals, for elite dispositions, the disintegration of recognizable forms.”

2 Mircea Nicolae – gunoaie, resturi i ruine. 2012, available at <http://mircea-nicolae.blogspot.ro/2012/04/gunoaie-resturi-si-ruine.html>



Figure 6 - “Garbage” collected from the ruins of an old and majestic mill (Moara lui Assan) and exhibited in an art gallery in Bucharest [© Mircea Nicolae – gunoaie, resturi și ruine. 2012]
Credits: Liviu Chelcea.

Such urban “explorations” are part of a process of re-enchantment (Ritzer, 2005) of mobile and immobile industrial artifacts. Culescu nicely describes how

the administrative abandonment of such spaces creates a double positioning of society towards them: on the one hand they undergo diminishing value (hence “wasteland”, “fallow”, “open-ended”), and on the other hand they gain a moral dimension of sacred space or forbidden space. (2007: 9)

Michael Roth, pointing out the relation between ambiguity and creativity, noted that: “the ambiguity becomes a fertile ground of metaphor, so that bodies, ideas, work of art can be framed as ruins just as buildings can” (1997: 2; see also Maskit, 2007).



Figure 7 - Mobile industrial artifacts rescued by an artist and exhibited in a gallery
© Mircea Nicolae – gunoaie, resturi și ruine. 2012

The “discovery” and display of such places are interesting acts of appropriation. As legal scholars have emphasized, communication of property claims is a key form of exercising ownership (Rose, 1994). Lacking visible signs which would indicate the property rights over nonfunctional factories, many postindustrial spaces seem to belong to no one, while the rest of the city has clear rules of access, inclusion and exclusion. Through curated presence outside the physical confines of ex-industrial sites or through digital representation on blogs, such people generate a subaltern, alternative urban geography. On the website of the “Romanian community of urban and industrial explorers”, there was a post a few years ago that read: “we are trying to gather as much information about interesting places, abandoned or not, which deserve to be visited or photographed.” The fact that postindustrial sites “deserve” to be visited indicates the symbolic reinsertion of industrial sites into the local cultural landscape.

The “discovery” of industrial sites after activity stopped by *flâneurs* implies a particular temporal regime. In a study of Detroit, Cope (2004: 11) mentioned that, following the massive depopulation, the city’s landscape looks as if it never got past the 1960s and that nature took over. Similarly, the standing factories of Bucharest “froze” in the 1980s. Some even look as if they froze some time in the late XIXth century, when they were built. Many of them did not change their appearance, fueling a sense of “picturesque” (Langhorst, 2015: 3-4). In that context, the “exploration” of these sites is not only geographical and spatial, but also temporal. Such *flâneurs* consume not only urban space, but different historical periods. There is something “postmodern” and fragmentary about the re-enchantment of postindustrial sites through “explorations.” They offer images about history, rather than a

search for “lost time” and personal memories as none of these people had any connection to the industrial plants when they were functional. Their sensibility resonates with Charles Jencks’ observation that one may live simultaneously in several worlds in the contemporary culture: “why, if one can afford to live in different ages and cultures, restrict oneself to the present, the locale? Eclecticism is the natural evolution of a culture with choice” (Jencks quoted in Harvey, 1989: 87).

CONCLUSIONS

The ethnographic fragments offered above raise important questions about the articulation of value, power, nature, time, materiality and representation in contemporary societies. Many nonfunctional, ex-industrial sites are anything but “abandoned.” Marginal urban dwellers, both human and non-human use them in several ways. Some practice “urban mining,” extracting scrap metal and construction materials which may be sold or reused somewhere else. Such sites function as nonhegemonic, heterotopic spaces. Children find such neighborhood spaces make good playgrounds. Persons of limited means make such places their shelter, being forced by the lack of social programs to live during the night in such places. Plants and animals too are pushed into them, finding refuge from the rest of the city where the municipal administration, city residents and agents of municipal boosterism spend money to separate urban society from nature. I have also argued that such sites represent a challenge to discourse and conceptual representation. The emerging eclectic landscape is difficult to name and hard to define. Such sites resist clear master narratives as a frame of interpretation. I have used several digital, artistic and heritage practices as a means to explore this ambiguity. Urban explorers and artists use such spaces as resources for their work. In so doing they seek to transform ex-industrial rubble into ruins, appropriating them and repositioning them in other interpretative frames.³

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ABSTRACT: Ex-industrial areas, which occupy about 15 per cent of Bucharest's surface, have generated emergent ecologies during the post-socialist period. The open-ended, eclectic and hard-to-define nature of such sites resists the common interpretations in terms of (industrial) heritage, nature, creative industries or speculative real estate development. Consequently, such post-industrial ecologies should be approached in a non-teleological way: neither as sanitized ruins, nor as fetishised nature, but as provisional ex-industrial materialities transformed by new human and non-human actors. I identify four main processes unfolding in such sites: urban mining; use as playgrounds for children; use as refuges for marginal humans and animals; and struggles for significance. None of these predominate.

RÉSUMÉ : Les anciennes zones industrielles de Bucarest, qui occupent environ 15 % de la surface de la ville, ont généré des écologies émergentes au cours de la période post-socialiste. Le caractère ouvert, éclectique et difficile à définir de tels sites résiste aux interprétations communes en termes de patrimoine (industriel), de nature, d'industries créatives ou de développement immobilier spéculatif. Par conséquent, ces écologies post-industrielles doivent être abordées d'une manière non-téléologique : ni comme des ruines assainies, ni encore comme une nature fétichisée, mais en tant que matérialités ex-industrielles provisoires, transformées par de nouveaux acteurs humains et non-humains. J'identifie dans cet article quatre processus principaux qui se déroulent sur ces sites : des activités d'extractivisme urbaine (*urban mining*) ; des usages en tant qu'aire de jeux pour enfants ; des emplois comme refuge pour individus et animaux marginalisés ; des luttes pour donner du sens à ces lieux. Aucune de ces pratiques ne prédomine sur les autres.

KEYWORDS: post-industrial, industrial heritage, ecology, industrial areas, ruins, de-industrialization, Eastern Europe, post-socialism.

MOTS-CLÉS : patrimoine industriel/post-industriel, écologie, sites industriels, ruines, désindustrialisation, Europe de l'Est, post-socialisme.